

# The Harm Reductionist Guide to Masks and How to Use Them



We are dealing with a pandemic caused by a virus we don't know much about. Everyone has been struggling to figure out the best way to **protect themselves, protect their families, and safeguard public health.**

So much of the information we are bombarded with is contradictory, difficult to verify, and ever-changing.

I have conducted an independent review of the scientific literature about face masks and virus transmission, in order to **help people make safe decisions for themselves and their families.**

*To find my methods and annotated bibliography, [click here.](#)* 

## In a nutshell:

- **Wear a cloth mask when in public**, not to protect yourself, but because **if we all do it, infections and deaths will be prevented.**
- **Wash your cloth mask in hot water** and/or **put in the dryer on high** for at least **30 minutes** daily or if soiled.
- **N95 masks protect the wearer**, but if you're not a front-line worker or a member of a vulnerable population who is forced to go out of the house, **don't take urgently needed supplies from healthcare workers.**

# What kinds of masks are available and what are they for ?



**N95**



**N99**



**FFP2**



**P100**

## N95, N99, FFP2 and P100 masks

are designed to **protect the wearer** of the mask from **95-100% of infectious particles**.

**They are not designed to protect others** from the wearer, but they do help a little. <sup>32, 48, 57</sup>

They can be **reusable** with replaceable filters or **disposable**.

Some are **one size** and some are **fitted**. If you get a fitted one, make sure it fits right by a **professional fit test** if possible.



**If you can feel air moving around the mask, it is not working.**

Some have **one-way valves for exhaled breath**. They are kind of like a positive pressure room for your face. **They allow air to flow out, but not in**, thus protecting the person inside from any outside contamination.



Whether they have a valve or not, **some of the wearer's breath can escape**, especially if **breathing heavily**.

# What kinds of masks are available and what are they for ?



**NOTE: N95 masks only work if you use both straps.**

**Surgical (ties behind head) and procedure (ear loops) masks are designed to protect others from the wearer.**

The materials have similar filtration power to N95, but they are not fitted to the face, so **air flows in and out around the sides of the mask.**

They offer some protection to the wearer in most studies, <sup>2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 40, 41, 43, 47, 48, 51, 52, 57, 64, 69, 72, 80</sup> **but their real use is protecting others.** <sup>17, 19, 20, 31, 33, 34, 46, 48, 49, 57</sup>

**Cloth masks** are not as good as surgical or procedure masks, but do help to **protect the wearer** <sup>51, 60, 64</sup> **and others.** <sup>19, 51, 72</sup>

These two papers are useful in finding info about **making better homemade masks.** <sup>51, 60</sup>



## **CDC:** How to Make Cloth Face Coverings

- Sewn Cloth Face Covering 
- Non-Sewn Cloth Face Covering

Face Masks and Surgical Masks for COVID-19:  
Manufacturing, Purchasing, Importing, and Donating  
Masks During the Public Health Emergency 



# Questions and Answers

**If I have a disposable N95, surgical, or procedure mask, can I reuse it?**

**Disposable masks can be reused until soiled, torn, or hard to breathe through.**<sup>5, 21, 28, 53</sup> Cover your reusable mask with a face shield, surgical or procedure mask, or cloth covering to keep it clean.<sup>5, 28</sup>

**Between uses, store in a breathable container like a paper bag so that the moisture from your breath has a chance to dry out.**<sup>5, 21, 28, 53</sup>

**Do not store it where it will get dirty, like on your rearview mirror or coat rack.**



**TOUCH YOUR MASK AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE.**

**If I have a really old N95 or other mask, will it still work?**

Masks stored in original packaging for **up to 10 years** work just fine.<sup>73</sup>

**Does my N95 still work if I wear it over my facial hair?**

It is recommended to **shave no more than 8 hours before** wearing a fitted mask such as N95.<sup>27</sup> Excessive facial hair interferes with the seal of the mask around the face, rendering N95 masks ineffective for protecting the wearer but still effective for protecting others.

# Questions and Answers

## Should I put a mask on my child?

CDC recommends that **children under 2 years old should not wear masks.** 



There is recent data on masks designed for children,<sup>23</sup> but nothing definite.

For **older kids**, parents can consider:

- Can they **wear it correctly**?
- Can the kid handle wearing a mask **physically, emotionally, and psychologically**?
- Will they be able to keep from **touching it or dropping it**?



**CDC:** Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19



**If the child is having symptoms** such as cough or fever **and there is no way to avoid going out** into public, I would recommend wearing a mask.

## Will wearing a mask affect my skin?

Many people report itching, rash, or acne **with prolonged mask use.**<sup>22, 70</sup> Minimize this by **keeping your mask as clean** as possible, and not wearing makeup or lip balm while using it.

## How can I put it on and take it off safely?

**Never touch the front of the mask**, because the virus might be able to live on your mask for **up to a day.**<sup>13, 56</sup> [Click here](#) for instructions, posters, and videos about “donning” and “doffing” masks and other PPE. 

## Can wearing a mask affect my breathing?

People can experience **breathing difficulty** if they **wear masks for prolonged periods**, especially N95 masks with additional covering,<sup>63</sup> and especially **if they are pregnant**<sup>71</sup> or have other health conditions that affect breathing. [↪](#)

If you think you might experience this, it can be helpful to **get used to wearing the mask at home before going out** and facing the added stress of public spaces.

If you are having trouble breathing

or

if you're feeling panicky

**DON'T WEAR A MASK**



## What can I do about strangers in public who don't wear masks or don't wear them properly?

**Nothing.**

There are many reasons why someone might not wear a mask. **It is not effective or advisable to shame strangers** for mask compliance.

Perhaps they have a respiratory condition that makes it impossible for them to breathe in a mask. Perhaps they have been racially profiled for wearing a mask and have decided it's safer not to. Maybe they have a history of trauma. Or claustrophobia. Or any number of other good reasons.

There is no way for you to know what went into **their decision to wear or not wear a mask.** **Be compassionate** and give your fellow citizens the benefit of the doubt.



If enough people wear masks.  
We can protect each other.

There is no way to completely eliminate the risks

of COVID-19

**DO THE BEST YOU CAN.**

If we all do the best we can, it will be good enough!

Wash your hands often with **soap and water for 20+ seconds.**  
Or use a **hand sanitizer that is 60% alcohol.**



**Wear a mask if you can.**

Wash your used cloth masks in hot water and/or  
put in the **dryer on high** for at least **30 minutes**



If you have **symptoms, isolate** from others but  
**communicate** with your community about your needs.

**Don't take essential supplies from healthcare workers.**

